Daeniken, Swiss author who popularised ancient alien theories, dies at 90

ZURICH: Best-selling Swiss author Erich von Daeniken, who built a lucrative career on his argument, rubbished by scientists and archaeologists, that humanity owes much of its development to the intervention of extraterrestrials, has died aged 90.

Chariots of the Gods?, published in 1968, sold millions of copies with its thesis that advanced aliens had repeatedly visited Earth, leaving their mark in the form of Inca and Egyptian ruins, cave drawings and other physical monuments.

"It took courage to write this book, and it will take courage to read it," the work begins. It acknowledged that scholars would dismiss it as nonsense, but insisted that "the past teemed with unknown gods who visited the primeval earth in manned spaceships".

'Pseudoscience' theories

Academics wrote books refuting his theories, criticising him as a purveyor of some of the more fantastical notions of pseudoscience. German news magazine *Der Spiegel* even had a 1973 cover story titled *The Daeniken Hoax*.

Nevertheless, legions of fans snapped up his more than 40 books and watched his television specials and documentary films. The over 70 million books that he sold were translated into more than 30 languages.

Von Daeniken spent the early part of his working life managing a hotel in eastern Switzerland, where a fraud conviction landed him in jail for 18 months. But as his book took off, he emerged from prison as a best-selling author.

Still, he never presented the smoking gun to fulfil astronomer Carl Sagan's famous adage that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". "He ... says that the astonishing astronomical information ancient civilisations, such as the Mayan, had is proof that there were some space travelers around to teach it to them. This fits in with his general questioning of the ability of the

ERICH von Daeniken

Egyptians to build the pyramids, or the Easter Islanders to erect those massive stone heads," the *New York Times* wrote in 1974.

"His method is to use a negative — ancient peoples couldn't have done or thought all the things they did — to prove a positive — that the ancient people were the beneficiaries of some kind of cosmological Point 4 (development assistance) programme." Such criticism never knocked von Daeniken off his stride.

"We owe it to our self-respect to be rational and objective," he wrote. "At some time or other every daring theory seemed to be a Utopia. How many Utopias have long since become everyday realities!" Television specials about his books made him a well-known figure in Europe and the United States. In 2003 he opened a Mysteries of the World theme park in Interlaken — although it went bust after three years.

Return of the Aliens

In a treatise on his website, von Daeniken said he was not an esoteric, and that his work served to debunk "a world of religious and unfortunately often scientific humbugs". "From countless old written records I know that these 'gods' promised to return. Then we will experience the god shock, a total catastrophe in religion and science. And everything would have been so easy to understand — without this god shock. The evidence speaks a clear language. That is what drives me." The release in July 2021 of a watershed US government UFO report that did not rule out extraterrestrial origins gave him hope.

"In future, anyone who talks about UFOs and extraterrestrials can no longer simply be ridiculed. People will slowly realise that many things are possible that they previously considered impossible," he told the *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* newspaper.

"As soon as we are prepared and get used to the idea that we are not alone in the universe, the extraterrestrials will come to us. I expect that to be the case within the next 10 years."—Reuters

Trump tells Cuba to 'make a deal, before it is too late'

WASHINGTON/MEXICO CITY: US President Donald Trump urged Cuba on Sunday to "make a deal" or face unspecified consequences, warning that the flow of Venezuelan oil and money to Havana would now stop.

"THERE WILL BE NO MORE OIL OR MONEY GOING TO CUBA - ZERO!" Trump said on his Truth Social channel. "I strongly suggest they make a deal, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE."

His remarks come a week after US forces seized Venezuela's leader Nicolas Maduro in a nighttime operation in Caracas that killed dozens of Venezuelan and Cuban security forces.

Earlier on Sunday, Trump reposted a message suggesting that US Secretary of State Marco Rubio could become the president of now communist-ruled Cuba.

Trump shared that post with the comment: "Sounds good to me!"

In his own post soon afterwards, Trump said that "Cuba lived, for many years, on large amounts of OIL and MONEY from Venezuela. In return, Cuba provided 'Security Services' for the last two Venezuelan dictators, BUT NOT ANYMORE!"

"Most of those Cubans are DEAD from last week's U.S.A. attack, and Venezuela doesn't need protection anymore from the thugs and extortionists who held them hostage for so many years."

Under a US trade embargo, Havana since 2000 has increasingly relied on Venezuelan oil provided as part of a deal struck with Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chavez.

'Criminal' manner

Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez said the country has not received compensation for security services provided to any other country, according to a post on X on Sunday.

He added that the Cuba has the right to import fuel from any country willing to export it. Cuba historically has imported most of its fuel from Venezuela and Mexico.

Rodriguez accused the US of behaving in a "criminal" manner that threatens global peace.—Agencies

US announces 'large-scale' strikes against IS

WASHINGTON: US and allied forces carried out "large-scale" strikes against the militant Islamic State group in Syria on Saturday, the US military said, the latest response to an attack last month that killed three Americans.

US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees American military forces in the region, said multiple strikes "targeted ISIS throughout Syria," using an acronym for the jihadist group.

CENTCOM's post on X did not give specifics on where they took place. Grainy aerial video accompanying the post showed several separate explosions, apparently in rural areas.

The strikes were part of Operation Hawkeye Strike, which was launched "in direct response to the deadly ISIS attack on US and Syrian forces in Palmyra," CENTCOM said.—AFP

CITIZENS gather to welcome the arrival of vehicles transporting Kurdish fighters from Aleppo to the northeastern city of Qamishli on Sunday.—AFP

Syrian forces take control of Aleppo's Kurdish areas

ALEPPO: Syria's government was in full control of Aleppo on Sunday after taking over the city's Kurdish neighbourhoods and evacuating fighters there to Kurdish autonomous areas following days of deadly clashes.

Residents of the Ashrafiyeh neighbourhood, the first of two areas to fall to the Syrian army, began returning to their homes to inspect the damage, finding shrapnel and broken glass littering the streets.

The violence started earlier this week after negotiations stalled on integrating the Kurds' de facto autonomous administration and forces into the country's new government.

A Syrian security official said that 419 Kurdish fighters, including 59 wounded and an unspecified number of dead, were transferred from the Sheikh Maqsud neighbourhood — the second area to come under army control — to the Kurdish-controlled zone in the northeast.

The arriving fighters were met with tears and vows of vengeance from hundreds of people who gathered to greet them in the northeastern Kurdish city of Qamishli, according to correspondents at the scene. "We will avenge Sheikh Maqsud... we will avenge our fighters, we will avenge our martyrs," Umm Dalil, 55, said.

A correspondent saw crossed-out images of Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and US envoy Tom Barrack, as people chanted against Sharaa.

Kurdish leader Mazlum Abdi said on X that the combatants were evacuated "through the mediation of international parties to stop the attacks and violations against our people in Aleppo".

The Syrian official said that 300 other Kurds, including fighters and members of the domestic security forces, had been arrested. Britain-based monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that 300 "young Kurds" had been arrested, stating that they were "civilians, not fighters".

Damaged walls, looted homes

On Sunday in Ashrafiyeh, a correspondent saw people carrying bags and blankets return to their homes after being searched by security forces. Yahya al-Sufi, a 49-year-old clothing seller, said he had fled during the violence.

"When we returned, we found holes in the walls and our homes had been looted... Now that things have calmed down, we're back to repair the walls and restore the water and electricity," he said. Some had hoped calm would prevail between the government in Damascus and the Kurdish fighters.

"We didn't want things to get this bad. I wish the Kurdish leadership had responded to the Syrian state. We've had enough bloodshed," said Mohammed Bitar, 39, who stayed in the Ashrafieh neighbourhood.

"There's no Arab, no Kurd, we're all Syrians." Sheikh Maqsud, however, remained off limits on Sunday, with residents barred from returning, an interior ministry source said. A correspondent in the area saw burnt armoured vehicles, cars loaded with ammunition and many landmines authorities took during their combing operation.

Syrian authorities said on Sunday that the toll from the fighting had reached "24 dead and 129 wounded since last Tuesday", while the Observatory reported 45 civilians and 60 soldiers and fighters were killed from both sides.

The Observatory reported "field executions" and the burning of fighters' bodies in Sheikh Maqsud by government forces, along with other "violations", but this news agency was unable to independently verify the claims.—AFP

One Battle After Another heads into Golden Globes as favourite

BEVERLY HILLS: Hollywood's A-listers are set to hit the red carpet for the Golden Globes, with the politically charged *One Battle After Another* expected to solidify its status as the film to beat this awards season. With nine nominations, *One Battle* appears a lock to take home the prize for best comedy/musical film.

"We're seeing a real sweep and a juggernaut in that movie," Deadline's awards columnist and chief critic Pete Hammond said, two months ahead of the Oscars.

Paul Thomas Anderson's screwball thriller, which centers on an aging revolutionary (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his teenage daughter (Chase Infiniti), is a rollicking ride featuring violent leftist radicals, immigration raids and white supremacists.

At a time when the United States is deeply polarised, many critics and pundits have hailed the film as capturing the moment. DiCaprio will vie for best actor at the Globes — a sometimes eccentric bellwether for the Academy Awards — with Timothee Chalamet, who stars in *Marty Supreme* as an ambitious 1950s table tennis player.

"Leonardo DiCaprio would be tremendously helped by actually winning at the Globes. That's the ideal moment to stop Timothee Chalamet's momentum before the Oscars," Hammond said.

Teyana Taylor, who plays an unapologetically bold leftist revolutionary, could fuel a sweep for *One Battle* if she can pick up the prize for best supporting actress. But in her way are Amy Madigan for her wacky villainous turn in *Weapons* and Ariana Grande for her portrayal of Glinda in the blockbuster *Wicked: For Good*.—AFP

India wants phone makers to share source code

NEW DELHI: India has proposed requiring smartphone makers to share source code with the government and make several software changes as part of a raft of security measures, prompting behind-the-scenes opposition from giants like Apple and Samsung.

The tech companies have countered that the package of 83 security standards, which would also include a requirement to alert the government to major software updates, lacks any global precedent and risks revealing proprietary details, according to four people familiar with the discussions and a review of confidential government and industry documents.

The plan is part of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts to boost the security of data of 750 million phones.

IT Secretary S. Krishnan said that "any legitimate concerns of the industry will be addressed with an open mind", adding it was "premature to read more into it".

Apple, South Korea's Samsung, Google, China's Xiaomi and MAIT, the Indian industry group that represents the firms, did not respond to requests for comment.

Indian government requirements have irked technology firms before.

Xiaomi and Samsung — whose phones use Google's Android operating system — hold 19 and 15 per cent, respectively, of India's market share and Apple 5pc, Counterpoint Research estimates.

Among the most sensitive requirements in the new Indian Telecom Security Assurance Requirements is access to source code — the underlying programming instructions that make phones work. —Reuters

Urgent reforms proposed to avert another IMF loan

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inverted input tariffs, advance income tax deductions, delayed sales tax refunds and persistent working capital lockups".

It said these issues disproportionately affected exporters and were particularly binding for small and medium enterprises across manufacturing and agri-based value chains.

The panel said that policy unpredictability was also weakening investment and buyer confidence. "Frequent changes in tax policy, energy pricing, tariff structures, export incentives and regulatory regimes, often announced late in the business cycle, constrain forward planning, capacity expansion and scaling, particularly around annual export order booking cycles," it said.

The synopses also highlighted institutional fragmentation and regulatory burdens. They said inconsistent definitions of SMEs across the State Bank of Pakistan, SMEDA, the Federal Board of Revenue and provincial authorities restricted access to finance, incentives and support schemes. Overlapping mandates, discretionary enforcement, excessive audits and weak inter-agency coordination increased compliance costs and uncertainty, the panel said.

Moreover, exporters also faced weak domestic quality, testing and compliance infrastructure, increasing reliance on overseas laboratories for certification and testing, it said, adding: "This raises costs, lengthens lead times and elevates rejection risks in regulated export markets, constraining movement into higher value products and destinations."

Limited access to affordable finance was also highlighted as a constraint on upgrading and value addition. The panel said export credit, insurance, guarantees, and long-term financing instruments remained underdeveloped, while high interest rates, collateral requirements, and liquidity constraints curtailed SME investment in technology, compliance, and scaling.

The committee also questioned the implementation of export facilitation and input schemes, including the Export Facilitation Scheme, saying procedural delays, higher input costs and working-capital pressures were limiting effective sourcing of raw materials and intermediate inputs.

In addition, it cited logistics and trade facilitation bottlenecks, including high inland freight costs, underutilised rail, port congestion, slow customs clearance, inadequate cold-chain infrastructure and weak courier and postal systems for SMEs.

It noted that at Port Qasim, the absence of dedicated export terminals, limited handling infrastructure, inadequate covered storage and constrained evacuation arrangements increased dwell time, handling costs and shipment uncertainty. It also pointed to skills gaps, low value addition and weak branding as barriers to moving into higher-value segments.

Based on consultations, the Planning Commission is now collecting additional information through a private-sector survey to refine inputs and develop a data-driven, sector-specific technical roadmap to enhance exports under the Uraan Pakistan strategic plan.

"Pakistan's development, economic sovereignty and even national security now hinge on one thing: how fast we can grow our exports and move to an export-led growth model," Mr Iqbal said at the conclusion of the consultations.

He added that "the only way to break free from foreign crutches and avoid the next IMF programme is to rapidly increase our exports and build strong foreign exchange reserves".

The 20 products covered during these engagements included copper, gems and jewellery, software and IT services, fish and fish preparations, rice, fruits and vegetables, meat and meat preparations, guar gum and its products, handicrafts, textile and apparel, sports goods, leather and leather products, surgical instruments, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, cement, carpets and rugs, engineering goods, footwear, plastic material and cutlery.

Pakistan currently exports about $30-35bn worth of goods, against Planning Commission estimates of an untapped annual potential of over $60bn.

The findings and recommendations will be consolidated into product-wise diagnostics and a targeted facilitation framework for submission to the prime minister. Their implementation would be subject to clearance under the tight requirements of the IMF conditions.

Israel's recognition of 'Somaliland' an 'act of aggression', Dar tells OIC

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permitted." Mr Dar called the internationally-recognised borders of Somalia "sacrosanct and inviolable" and said that the Somaliland region remained an "integral, inseparable and inalienable part of Somalia".

"No external actor has either the legal standing or the moral authority to alter that fundamental reality," he said. "Any act, statement or recognition thereof by a state or an external entity regarding any part of the Federal Republic of Somalia should therefore be considered null and void, producing no political or legal effects."

Mr Dar continued that Pakistan believed that the recognition of an integral part of a sovereign state was not a diplomatic act, but an act of "political aggression" that set a "perilous precedent, threatening peace and security in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea region, and beyond".

He added that Pakistan joined the group of OIC countries in "unequivocally rejecting the unlawful Israeli move" through the joint statement released in the immediate aftermath of Israel's recognition of "Somaliland".

The joint statement termed the recognition of "parts of states" a violation of the cardinal principles of international law and the UN Charter and noted the Israeli action's potential "serious repercussions" for the Horn of Africa region, the Red Sea region and for international security as a whole, he said.

"The OIC and the wider international community's firm rejection of this unlawful overture by Israel is, therefore, vital so that the impudent Israeli act does not set a precedent for other countries," Dar added.

Mr Dar said Pakistan fully aligned itself with the OIC's call "for all states and organisations to refrain from any form of formal, semi-formal, or informal engagement with the authorities of Somaliland", and to ensure that any engagement strictly respected the sovereignty and unity of Somalia.

"Pakistan categorically rejects any proposal or plan aimed at the forced displacement of Palestinians and linkages of Somaliland region of Federal Republic of Somalia with any such illegal action," he added.

"Any action that advocates or implies the displacement or relocation of Palestinians not only violates international law but also undermines the prospect of a just and lasting peace in the region."

Palestinian right

Mr Dar reaffirmed Pakistan's steadfast support for the Palestinian people in their legitimate struggle for self-determination, saying that the only path to lasting peace and stability lay in the realisation of an "independent, contiguous and sovereign" state of Palestine based on pre-1967 borders and with Al-Quds Al Sharif as its capital.

He added that as a "frontline supporter" of the UNSCR 2803 and the "Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict", Pakistan reiterated the intention to contribute to its successful implementation thereof, with a view to ensuring the sustainability of the ceasefire, bringing an end to the conflict in Gaza, to secure a "dignified life" for the Palestinian people who had endured prolonged humanitarian suffering, and leading to a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood.

"As a non-permanent member of the UNSC, Pakistan will continue to work with the OIC and Arab partners to mobilise global support for the Palestinian right to self-determination, justice and peace," he said.

'Nuclear flashpoint'

On the topic of India-occupied Kashmir, Mr Dar said that the unresolved dispute remained the "primary source of conflict in South Asia and a nuclear flashpoint".

He stressed the urgent need for renewed and concerted efforts under the UN auspices to secure a "just, lasting, and peaceful resolution of the dispute", in accordance with the relevant UNSC resolutions and the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

Mr Dar also appreciated the "strong, unwavering and consistent support that the OIC has always afforded to our Kashmiri brothers and sisters". Nevertheless, he urged the OIC to step up its efforts to support a just resolution of the dispute.